

Preview

Akron Symphony to celebrate 20th anniversary of *Gospel Meets Symphony* on February 23

by Mike Telin



“It really is the most coming together project in Akron” ... *Ann Lane Gates, honorary chair.* — “We use it to come together and to share something very powerful” ... *Christopher Wilkins, conductor.* — “It’s like stepping into the family that you never knew you had.” ... *Jennifer Mekel Jones, chorus master.* — “It truly brings the community together and shows everyone that we can all find common ground” ... *Angeleina Valentine, assistant-chair.* There is only one northeast Ohio event these four people could be talking about,

and that is *Gospel Meets Symphony*.

On Saturday, February 23rd beginning at 7:30 in The University of Akron’s EJ Thomas hall, the Akron Symphony Orchestra will celebrate *Gospel Meets Symphony*’s 20th anniversary concert featuring the 200 voice *Gospel Meets Symphony* Choir. The concert includes inspiring gospel and classical music under the direction of ASO Music Director, Christopher Wilkins, and *Gospel Meets Symphony* Chorus Master, Jennifer Mekel Jones. The concert also features performances by Divine Hope, YEPAW (Youth Excellence Performing Arts Workshops), and The LeGrair Brothers. Former ASO assistant conductor Eric Benjamin will also return for the occasion.

For those who remember the first *Gospel Meets Symphony* concert under the direction of the late Alan Balter, it’s difficult to believe that it has been twenty years. Was there a time when *Gospel Meets Symphony* did not exist? Although Saturday’s concert welcomes back many key players from the past, Christopher Wilkins points out that the big name that is missing is Alan Balter. “He was the vision of the whole thing and I have to think he is somewhere feeling really excited and proud that what he started continues strong. Not only the spirit but also the substance he established right from the beginning.” Alan Balter passed away unexpectedly on August 21, 1998 of complications following lung surgery for cancer at the age of 53.

Alan Balter was a visionary in the world of orchestral music. He understood, long before many of his peers, the importance of connecting to the local community in as many ways as possible. And it was Balter, along with Executive Director Connie Linsler and Board member Edward Metzger who decided that in spite of previous, failed attempts to form a minority outreach committee, they needed to keep trying. But they needed to find the right community leader to take on the job. “They called me and asked about the possibility of starting a minority outreach committee,” remembers Ann Lane Gates. “I had just retired from the Akron Public Schools where I was Assistant to the Superintendent for community relations and legislative affairs.” In addition to her work with the public schools, Gates had also served on the boards of community organizations such as the Metro Regional Transit Board, Boy Scouts of America, All-American Soap Box Derby, United Way, Akron Regional Development and Chamber of Commerce. “I knew so many people and a lot of people knew me.” Gates says she began calling people who she thought might be interested — music teachers and choir directors — and told them what they were attempting to do.

What followed was sort of a convergence of events. First, the ASO had received a grant to record *American Voices*, an album that would feature newly-commissioned works by African-American composers Billy Childs, David Baker and William Banfield. The album was released in 1995 on the Telarc label. Second, the new committee needed a high-profile project. Gates, having heard a Martin Luther King concert with the Cleveland Orchestra says ““I was so impressed and I thought, we could do that – bigger and better.”

“Everybody bought the idea because they thought [the recording] was a worthwhile project. And gospel music with the orchestra was also a new concept for the community. Alan Balter was very excited about the project because he had been doing similar things in Memphis.”

Soon the committee began contacting the African American churches in the community “I knew all of the ministers,” Gates remembers. “It’s kind of funny [she says laughing] but I called them and said you have been SELECTED to be part of...and asked them to send their choir directors and ministers of music to a meeting.” She says she also sought out people she knew were community-minded and was excited that so many people responded positively. Eventually Cleo Myricks was chosen as the first chorus master and the first *Gospel Meets Symphony* concert took place on January of 1993.

Gates recalls that what surprised her was the number of nationalities that participated in and attended that first concert. “We thought it would be an all-white orchestra and all-black choir but it didn’t turn out that way, thank goodness. When we opened it up, people came from all over. And there are people who have been friends since its inception.”

During our conversation Gates referred to *Gospel Meets Symphony* as her baby, but now that the baby is a young adult, is she happy with the way her baby has turned out? “Oh, very pleased and very happy to still be a part of it. BUT, this torch has got to be passed on and it has.”

ASO music director Christopher Wilkins admits that stepping into the role as conductor of the *Gospel Meets Symphony* concert did not initially come easy. “I had nothing but

trepidations about stepping into the role. I felt like there were dozens of people on that stage who knew a great deal more about the style, the repertoire, the traditions than I did. So I thought, what the heck am I doing trying lead people who themselves have a great deal of experience and expertise?”

Wilkins says that it took a couple of years to begin to feel at home with the event. “Chuck Myrick helped me a lot as did all of the chorus directors. Raymond Wise helped me to understand the music as did the *Gospel Meets Symphony* organizing committee; they have all helped me to understand what it’s really about and what makes it work.” He describes the concert as part concert, part church and part revival meeting. “It’s partly a party that is just a really good time and it’s partly just a community gathering. And that’s what makes it work in Akron.”

Although there have been many experiments along the way, Wilkins says that eventually they realized that it’s not about getting the most famous recording artist, it’s about the talent and the people that live in the area. “Everyone can feel a shared ownership and community connection and I think with *Gospel Meets Symphony* that’s what we feel.”

Chorus master Jennifer Mekel Jones agrees about the feeling of shared ownership and sense of community. “There are several people who have performed all twenty years, so obviously it’s not just the music, the chorus master, teachers or the conductor. These people have really joined together and bonded together and they look forward to this family reunion every year.”

Jones, who is in her fifth year as chorus master jokingly calls herself the baby of the bunch, but says that when she first arrived she was welcomed with open arms. “It does have that feeling like it has always been here. It’s like there never was a time when there wasn’t a *Gospel Meets Symphony*.”

“The challenge of preparing the chorus is really more associated with time,” Jones says of working with a 200 member all-volunteer chorus. “Gospel borrows from so many genres and ethnicities, so the question is, is there enough time to adequately teach all of the songs so that we can do them justice during the performance. But because everyone is a family they are very patient and understanding.”

In addition to Jones, each year other teachers are brought in to assist with the coaching duties. “This year Eric Benjamin is coaching the Beethoven [*Ode to Joy*] and the choir loves him. “I value the classical training that I received at the University of Akron, but since I spend more time on the gospel side with my work at Mt. Calvary Baptist Church and my solo career, Eric has been able to balance everything out nicely. We work together well because we do have common knowledge and common ground, however being able to focus on the areas where we spend most of our time really helps in our ability to teach the choir.”

Like all events that are of the size and scope of *Gospel Meets Symphony*, there is a lot of important behind the scenes work that needs to be accomplished. And, finding people with the right skills and grooming them to assume leadership positions is a task that all organizations face — or as Ann Lane Gates put it, “the torch must be passed.”

“I first became involved with Gospel Meets Symphony ten seasons ago, says this year's assistant chair, Angeleina Valentine. “I actually started as an interpreter for the deaf ministry. And since I also sang in my church choir, a couple years later I decided to sing, so I jumped into the soprano section. Then about three or four years ago I was asked to join the committee and last year I was voted in as the assistant chair.” Valentine says that she is the type of person who always seems to find herself in leadership roles. “This year I’m also on the Symphony Gala committee. One has many gifts, and being in leadership is something that I have been blessed with.”

Although she earned her undergraduate degree in psychology and is currently pursuing a master's in counseling, Valentine has plenty of artistic gifts to share as well. She performed the role of Lilly in the Akron Symphony production of *Porgy & Bess* two seasons ago. And on Saturday she will be the soprano soloist in the *Ode to Joy* from Beethoven's 9th symphony. “It's my first time of singing the Beethoven, so it's going to be great.”

Valentine also feels that *Gospel Meets Symphony* still plays an important role in the community; “This program brings together so many different backgrounds, ages, different races, and even religious backgrounds. To have us all come together for one night to show that we are standing in solidarity, and we all believe that this is a worthy community event is just too awesome to behold.”

So are younger people interested in Gospel Meets Symphony? “Yes!” Valentine says without hesitation. “Especially now that we are reaching out and bringing YEPAW back. And Jennifer is trying to bring in younger performers like Brandon Hollis. He's a big draw for young people. It takes things like that to get them interested, and once the word gets out that we're not just doing old songs, which are good and I love the old standbys, but [we need to bring in] fresh music in and begin to challenge everyone. I think that will help to draw in younger people.” Valentine also feels that having younger representation on the committee and more men would be a good thing. “The more ideas that are brought to the table is a good thing and it will be fun to see where we can take Gospel Meets Symphony during the next 20 years.”

Has the need for an event like Gospel Meets Symphony changed, or is community building an ongoing effort that evolves over time? Again Christopher Wilkins: “Fundamentally the need hasn't changed at all, in fact its deepened over time because it has touched generations of people. But I think the need that has given rise to 20 years of *Gospel Meets Symphony* is the same need that all human beings find met through music. It's the way music allows us to make a deep connection.”

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